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Third Series.

PAPERS FOR WAR TIME. No. 32

Are We to Punish Germany, if We Can?

By

A. CLUTTON-BROCK

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1915

T E O R
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BASIS OF PUBLICATION

This series of Papers is issued under the auspices of a Committee drawn from various Christian bodies and political parties, and is based on the following convictions :

1. That Great Britain was in August morally bound to declare war and is no less bound to carry the war to a decisive issue ;
2. That the war is none the less an outcome and a revelation of the un-Christian principles which have dominated the life of Western Christendom and of which both the Church and the nations have need to repent ;
3. That followers of Christ, as members of the Church, are linked to one another in a fellowship which transcends all divisions of nationality or race ;
4. That the Christian duties of love and forgiveness are as binding in time of war as in time of peace ;
5. That Christians are bound to recognize the insufficiency of mere compulsion for overcoming evil, and to place supreme reliance upon spiritual forces and in particular upon the power and method of the Cross ;
6. That only in proportion as Christian principles dictate the terms of settlement will a real and lasting peace be secured ;
7. That it is the duty of the Church to make an altogether new effort to realize and apply to all the relations of life its own positive ideal of brotherhood and fellowship ;
8. That with God all things are possible.

ARE WE TO PUNISH GERMANY, IF WE CAN ?

IT is a doctrine of civilization that a nation at war must consider two things, namely, its own victory and survival, and the future relations of all civilized peoples. It is the second consideration that has produced international law, according to which nations still have duties to each other when they are at war, because they have duties to the future of mankind, which includes their own future. There is no judge or policeman to enforce international law ; yet it exists because of a common faith of the nations in each other. They lay down rules in the quiet of peace to restrain themselves in the heat of war ; and these are like good resolutions that we make when we are not tempted, so that we may remember them when we are tempted, and so that we may not break them and be treacherous to ourselves.

International law assumes that war is an abnormal state, an evil, and a threat to all civilization. Its aim is to make the threat as little dangerous as possible ; to prevent the exasperation of war from lasting into the peace that is sure to follow ; and to confine the war to the original cause of quarrel, so that, when that is decided

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by the event, the war may not be continued merely because of the manner in which it has been conducted. Quarrels in some barbarous nations become blood-feuds lasting from one generation to another, and it is one of the chief duties of a family to carry on its blood-feud. International law tries to prevent wars from becoming blood-feuds and from wrecking all civilization by their persistence.

When nations at war keep agreements which they have made in peace, they still have some civilized relation with each other, so that, after the war is over, they can fall back easily into their normal state of friendliness, feeling that the quarrel was about some particular point and not a quarrel for ever or to the death. But if agreements are made in peace and broken in war, there will be a greater exasperation than if there had been no agreement at all ; the war, whatever its result, will not end the quarrel ; the peace will be one of exhaustion rather than of reconciliation, poisoned by memories of the manner in which the war was conducted.

So it is important that agreements made in peace should be kept in war, merely because they are agreements, and because the breaking of them produces a lasting resentment and a general insecurity. A nation that refuses to enter into any international agreements threatens

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civilization and its own future less than one which breaks agreements it has made. If it does that, it will seem to have made the agreements only so that it might have the advantage of unexpectedly breaking them ; and this is an advantage for which it will not soon be forgiven. That seems now to be the case of the Germans. They undertook not to use poisonous gases in war, as they undertook not to violate Belgium neutrality ; and in both cases they have gained an advantage by breaking their agreement. We cannot tell how far this bad faith was meant from the first. Probably they always meant to violate Belgian neutrality but not to use poisonous gases. They may have entered into most of their agreements meaning to keep them. Unfortunately they could not conceive of a war in which Germany would not soon make her victory certain. They were ready to keep their agreements, or some of them, so long as her victory seemed certain but when the certainty vanished, then, they felt, the agreements must vanish too ; and they must get what advantage they could by breaking them. This is a war, they say, of life and death ; and what do agreements matter compared with the survival of Germany ? Hence their growing disregard for all international law, both in its main principles and in its details, a disregard which has culminated so far in the use of poisonous gases and in the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

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The war is a life-and-death struggle, they say ; and they will make it as desperate as possible. They do not look beyond it to the future peace, because that will be made by the crushing of one side or the other ; and there will not be enough left of the losers to feel exasperation or, at any rate, to vent it. That, of course, is nonsense, as the war of 1870 proves. The Germans will not cease to be a nation, if they lose ; nor shall we, if they win. There will always be enough of us left to desire revenge and to make that desire a danger to Germany. But the Germans will not believe that now. We cannot, at present, make any appeal to their reason. We must, therefore, consider only the question of our own conduct.

In discussing this it is worse than useless to express amiable sentiments vaguely or to lament the general wickedness of war. These particular crimes are not part of the general wickedness of war ; and it only exasperates people now to tell them that every nation at war is equally guilty, because it is not true. We have to deal with a situation in which one nation thinks nothing of the future of Europe and wages war with no thought except of victory. She does not care whether she wrecks civilization in the process. If she wins, by whatever means, civilization is secured ; if she loses, it will be destroyed. That is her belief ; and so victory is her only aim, beyond

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which she does not look. The question is, therefore, whether this recklessness of hers is to impose the same recklessness upon us. Whether we too are to forget the future of civilization in our effort to punish Germany and defend ourselves. There is, of course, a real danger that we shall catch her recklessness, if she is strong enough to win further victories of moment. Our exasperation will grow with her success, especially if she succeeds through her breaking of international law. Then this may become a war as religious, or as irreligious, as the Thirty Years' War and may end in a general and lasting demoralization.

But we can separate in our minds the effort to defend ourselves from the effort to punish Germany ; and this separation is important as concerning our motive.

There are people—and it is very natural—who wish not only to defeat the Germans, but to punish them for the manner in which they are conducting the war. But at once the question arises, If we are going to try to punish the Germans, what Germans shall we succeed in punishing, and will the German nation regard it as punishment ? Let us take the case of gases. The gas used by the Germans not only puts those who are overcome by it out of action ; it also causes them to suffer great pain for a long time afterwards. Now, it may be

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that we could discover a gas which would put our enemies out of action, but would not afterwards cause them pain. Suppose, then, that we used, not this gas, but the painful gas, with the object of punishing the Germans : those Germans whom we should punish would be poor soldiers who had used the German gas only because they were told to do so, and most of whom were fighting for their country from a sense of duty. The Germans themselves, perhaps, have used a painful gas because they thought that we deserved punishment for our misdeeds ; and we can see in a moment the cruelty and injustice of making our soldiers suffer for the supposed wickedness of Sir Edward Grey. Now I do not believe for a moment that we or our allies would use a painful gas, where a painless one would serve, with the object of punishing the Germans. I only give it as an obvious instance of the cruelty and injustice of reprisals in war, or indeed of any attempt to punish a nation. To those who make the attempt it is a nation that they punish, but to the nation punished it is individual men, or women and children, who suffer ; and they are only enraged at the injustice and cruelty of it, as we are at this moment, when we think of our soldiers choking with the gas or our defenceless countrymen and women drowning in the sea. When one nation tries to punish another, it is never the nation that suffers or is conscious of punishment. The nation is conscious only

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of the wrong done to individual members of it and of a desire to avenge that wrong.

Thus reprisals, if they are meant to punish, punish the wrong people ; and, if they are meant to deter, they have the opposite effect. We have seen that already in our ‘special treatment’ of the prisoners from German submarines and in the eagerness with which the Germans took revenge for it. If they were at all afraid of us or our threats, they would never have bombarded Scarborough. They are not considering the question how they shall pay the bill if they lose. They are not going to lose, they think, but to win through their desperation ; and the more we punish them the more they will punish us, or rather those innocent and unfortunate Englishmen whom they are able to punish. Are we, therefore, going to make our soldiers and sailors suffer, because we want to punish the Germans ? That is the first question we have to ask ourselves, when we talk of punishment ; and to that there can be only one answer.

But there is a further question that we have to ask ourselves, and one that is more important still and perhaps more unpleasant. When we wish to punish the Germans, why do we wish to punish them ? Our immediate answer, if we do not stop to think, will be that we wish to punish them so that they may never do the like again. But is that the real reason ? That is a question which every one

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must answer for himself ; only it is his duty to find the true answer. There is nothing very wicked in desiring vengeance upon the Germans at this moment ; at least most human beings would desire it ; but to deceive yourself about your own motives is dangerous to yourself and to others. Therefore we must not tell ourselves that we wish to punish the Germans for the good of civilization, if our real desire is to take revenge on them ; for in that case we shall assume the most important point at issue, namely that our revenge will be for the good of civilization. Now it is through assuming points of this kind, and through supposing that their instinctive purposes are moral purposes, that the Germans have reached their present state of mind. Their crimes are great, but not such as no other nation could commit, and they have not committed them because they wished to be wicked. On the contrary they, like us, pride themselves on their moral sense, only unfortunately they have made it flatter their instincts. They wish to win, and they have told themselves that it is for the good of the world that they should win. Hence they do not care how they win, since their victory will be good in itself. We must not fall into the same error, lest we commit crimes like theirs. We must not tell ourselves that our revenge is for the good of the world ; for, if we do, we shall not care how we take it. Let us therefore assume that we have a very natural

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desire for revenge, and, having assumed that, let us ask whether it is for the good of the world that we should take it. All experience of revenge in the past will tell us that it is not. Revenge always breeds revenge, and no nation was ever convinced of its misdeeds because vengeance was taken for them. If we want to know what is the best way of dealing with our enemy, we must concern ourselves with his state of mind as well as our own. We are filled with moral indignation against the Germans ; but they are no less filled with moral indignation against us. Nothing is easier for any mass of human beings than to feel moral indignation, especially when they are in the wrong. It is in fact the means by which they protect themselves against their consciousness of their own wrong. And if revenge is taken upon them for that wrong, it merely acts as fuel for their moral indignation. They do not see it as revenge at all ; for to do that would be to admit that there was reason for revenge. They see it only as gratuitous wickedness, for which they proceed to take revenge, if they can. Therefore revenge, on one side or on the other, never has any effect except to gratify the instincts of those who take it.

Now we are not fighting this war to gratify our instincts. We have said, a hundred times, that we are fighting it for our own safety and the future of Europe ; and we must

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continue to fight it for those objects and for no others. Revenge will not bring us safety ; it will do harm, not good, to those of our countrymen who are in the enemy's power ; and it will prolong the war instead of shortening it. For if the Germans see that we are fighting for revenge, they will fight to escape the shame of it long after they are hopeless of victory. If they saw this war only as a trial of strength, they might confess defeat when they were defeated. But if they see it as a war of vengeance, they will fight on with growing recklessness and exasperation, as the Carthaginians fought the Romans in the third Punic War. We may crush them, perhaps, but we shall convince them, not of their wickedness but of ours. And at the end we shall have to deal with a sullen and ruined remnant, still a part of Europe, and still dreaming of future vengeance and past heroism. We want to teach them a lesson, as the saying is ; but it must be one that they will learn. Napoleon tried to teach Prussia a lesson ; but what Prussia learnt from him was the very opposite of what he tried to teach ; and so it will be now if we try to teach through vengeance.

We must make up our minds to it that, if the Germans are to learn any useful lesson at all from the war, they will learn it slowly through defeat and the inevitable consequences of defeat, not through our anger against them ; and further, that, while the war lasts, they will

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think it treachery to Germany to learn any useful lessons whatever. The consequences of their policy and conduct will become clear to them, not during the war, however much they may suffer from it, but afterwards, when they can consider calmly why they forced it and what they have suffered from it. We have, probably, a wild desire in our hearts to force them to see and confess their misdeeds. We dream of a broken and contrite nation abasing itself before its triumphant enemies. We may be sure that, whatever happens, that will not happen. We may force the Germans on to their knees, but they will not kneel and do penance from their own conviction of sin ; and our desire to see them kneel, however natural, is not to be encouraged. Since we are men and not gods, our business in this war is to conduct it with the aim not of punishing our enemies but of securing a lasting peace after it. And we must, therefore, make the securing of peace our one problem and not confuse it with any other problems suggested to us by our own sense of German wickedness. We must see ourselves, in fact, not as avenging angels but as policemen. The policeman is a figure less glorious and beautiful than the avenging angel ; but remember that Germany at this moment thinks of herself as an avenging angel, and that is why she seems a devil to the rest of the world. If we are avenging angels to ourselves, we shall be devils to the

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Germans and shall continue to be devils even when we have taken vengeance. That is the way in which the human mind works ; and our moral duty in this war is to be aware of the way in which it works, both in ourselves and in our enemies, and to act so that our actions may have the best possible effect both on our own minds and on theirs.

We may take it for granted that we all feel the German wickedness and should all like to punish them for it. There is no need to prove by strong language our sense of their guilt, or our sorrow for the loss and suffering which it has caused. We do not, in this matter, need to think of ourselves and our own attitudes and emotions at all ; but only of what is best to be done, so that the German crimes may not breed crimes between our children and theirs, many of them orphan children already. If we have a lust for vengeance, let us ask ourselves whether we wish to take it on those children, whatever nation they belong to. That question will make us forget our own emotional luxuries in the desire to save all those children from the calamities which their parents are suffering. The cure for all sentimental savagery, for all hysteria disguising itself as moral indignation, for all egotism that calls itself patriotic, indeed for self-deception of every kind, is in the thought of children

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and what is to be done for them. And that is not only because of the strong tie of blood which binds the father's present to the future of his child, but also because we see that children are children, and their childishness is not disguised or staled to us by the marks of age that ought to be experience.

But these German leaders, who think themselves gods of war and set their faces fiercely so that they may frighten the world, are only children, too, who have lost all the charm of childhood with their own pretension of wisdom and strength. They can do immeasurable harm because there is no one to whip them and put them to bed. We could laugh at their antics and at all this childish hysteria of the German people, if it were not so mischievous. But, though it has filled the world with mourning and rage, it is still childish and pitiful and blind. Their wickedness is naughtiness, defiant, hysterical, glutting itself upon its own violence. It has to be restrained, if we can restrain it. Germany must be mastered and held down like a child that has lost all control of itself, but not hated or shattered with a blind violence like her own. For if we all give way to the childishness that is in us, the world will become a hideous nursery of murderous children, with no grown-up wisdom or kindness to prevent them from shedding each other's blood ; until nothing is left but death and ruin. We have

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the chance now to exercise that wisdom and also that kindness which, if we cannot feel it for our enemies, we must feel for our own children. And, if we feel it for them and let it guide our hearts, it will not rob us of courage and endurance, but it will make us desire what we ought to desire in the conduct of the war ; and it will show us how that desire may best be accomplished.

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